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Session 314: Consequences of family policies (Organizer: Heather Joshi)

Consequences of family policies on childbearing behavior: Effects or artifacts?

The prevailing theories of family and fertility changes in advanced industrialized societies, such as the theories of increased female autonomy, relative economic deprivation, or ideational shifts, all give primacy to individual social and economic factors in explaining fertility changes. More recently, however, demographers have started to question whether merely individual-centered approaches are sufficient to grasp the differences in fertility. Demographic researchers have increasingly begun to pay attention to institutional and political factors and explore the role that family policies play in shaping family formation and childbearing behavior in advanced industrialized societies.

Although differences in macro-level indicators like the TFR suggest a relationship between family policies and fertility trends, in-depth analyses of the effects of family policies on childbearing behavior remain often inconclusive. This paper deals with this puzzling fact by investigating the consequences of family policies on childbearing behavior from a theoretical, methodological and empirical perspective.

The first part of the paper discusses the relationship between welfare-state configurations and family policies. We regard family policies as part of a country's welfare-state policies that structure society through interventions into private relationships. Such a conception of family policies necessitates considering the relationship between welfare-state configurations and family policies in more detail. We discuss this relationship focusing on European welfare states. Contrary to conventional welfare-state research we do not only focus on Western European welfare states and the way in which they integrate family policies into their welfare-state systems, but we also discuss Eastern European social-policy systems. This

allows us to better illuminate central elements of the relationship between welfare-state setups and family policies that seem to be relevant for the demographic consequences of family policies: the degree of homogeneity of welfare-state setups and family policies; the degree of coherence among welfare-state policies and family policies; the aims of welfare-state policies and of family policies; the “locus” of welfare-state policies and of family policies; and the dynamics of welfare-state change and family policies. We exemplify these elements and their importance for an understanding of the demographic consequences of family policies by looking more closely at specific countries and by comparing the central elements across European welfare states.

The second part of the paper discusses the nature of family policies. We look at the setups of various family policies within specific countries to illustrate two central elements of family policies. First, we show that despite the fact that specific family policies in various countries seem to be of similar nature, they may differ widely as far as their setup is concerned (for example, concerning eligibility regulations). Second, we look at the extent to which family policies in a country contradict each other or form a coherent set of policies. We discuss to what extent such features of family policies may account for the differences (or the lack) in demographic effects found in several demographic studies on the consequences of family policies on childbearing behavior.

Given these contextual and content-related aspects of family policies the third part of the paper deals with the question how to study the impact of family policies on childbearing behavior. This first and foremost concerns the problem of how to properly measure the impact of macro-level factors (family policies) on individual behavior given the fact that there are other macro-level factors that may affect childbearing behavior, as well. We concentrate on three issues that concern every demographic study investigating the impact of policies on demographic behavior: time, space, and individual application or use of family policies. The first relates to the study of “period effects” of policies. We argue that due to other intervening (and changing) macrofactors, studying the impact of family policies over a given period of time often produces artifacts rather than true results of policy effects. We present empirical examples to demonstrate that research on the effects of family policies on childbearing over calendar time needs to focus on the timing and specific aspects of policy interventions. As far as “space” is concerned we distinguish between national

and subnational levels. We present some results of our studies on the consequences of family policies on childbearing behavior to show the need for comparative research on both levels in order to assess the impact of policies properly. While cross-country research is necessary to grasp effects of various policy set-ups, a subnational focus can produce some variation across space and thus illuminate how a specific policy is implemented. Such a variation allows for a better detection of the effects of policies on individual behavior. Our third empirical example deals with the individual use of family policies and thus with the direct effect of such policies on subsequent demographic behavior. We demonstrate that such research is often necessary in order to distinguish effects of family policies from other potential micro- and macro-level effects on individual childbearing behavior. We conclude by outlining the major points that need to be addressed when designing a research project that deals with the consequences of family policies.